DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 276 730 SP 028 435

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TITLE The Role of the Supervisor Refined.
PUB DATE Feb 86
NOTE 19p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Association of Teacher Educators (Atlanta, GA, February 22-26, 1986).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Conferences; Higher Education; *Interaction Process Analysis; Methods Courses; Preservice Teacher Education; *Student Teachers; *Student Teacher Supervisors; *Teacher Student Relationship; *Teaching Methods

ABSTRACT

This paper presents a means to analyze the interactions that take place during a supervisory conference between a student teacher and the college supervisor. The theoretical perspective is described and transcripts of conferences for the Michigan State University Multiple Perspectives Teacher Education program are used as examples. Following analysis of the transcripts of student teacher and supervisor conferences, it was hypothesized that the quality of the conferences is embedded in the ability of the supervisor to orchestrate the linkages during the conferences. This means that the supervisor must be able to interactively develop with the student teacher a dialogue in which the complexity of ideas and linkages increases over time and even over a given conference. This requires two specific types of ability. The first is the ability to make links between practice and the professional knowledge taught in a given program. The second is the ability to determine with the student teacher the appropriate amount of data to be discussed. Too little information will leave the student teacher unchallenged and at his or her current place of practice. On the other hand, too much may leave the candidate overloaded and confused about what to do next. That leaves the supervisor and the student teacher with the task of determining the "just right" place so that the student teacher can advance between conferences. Examples of supervisor--student teacher dialogues are used as illustrations. (JD)

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The Role of the Supervisor Refined

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A Paper Presented at Association of Teacher Educators
Atlanta, Georgia February 1986

SP 028 435

Michigan State University
Multiple Perspectives
Teacher Education Program

The Role of the Supervisor Refined

Most perspective teachers complete a portion of their professional education in a field placement where they make applications of subject area and professional knowledge. The field placement may be in a school convenient to the university, a university lab school or in a school near the student teacher's hometown, but several elements remain constant. Most placements include the student teacher, a cooperating teacher or teachers, groups of students and a university supervisor. The student teachers come to the school placement to apply their knowledge and skills in a cooperating teacher's classroom. Generally, the student teacher is supervised by the cooperating teacher and/or university personnel.

One facet of the student teaching process is the supervisory conference between the supervisor(s) and the student teacher. The topics of this conference are the student teacher's teaching and his/her relationship with the cooperating teacher. This supervisory conference provides the supervisor and the student teacher with the opportunity to interact about the supervisor's observations and the perceptions of the student teacher about his/her applications of subject matter and methods.

The supervisory conference has been studied from a variety of perspectives. For example, Cogan (1973) describes the supervisory conference as clinical supervision. In the clinical supervision process, there are actually several conferences. The first conference focuses on planning for the lesson and for the observation. After the observation the supervisor makes decisions about the direction of the clinical supervision conference. An example would be the supervisor's decision to talk with the student teacher

about classroom management after observing several disruptive students. Together they decide on changes for future plans and instruction. In the case of the management example, the student teacher and supervisor may decide that more active participation on the part of the pupils is needed. Another example is provided by Zeichner (1985) who modifies the clinical interview to include reflective thinking on the intentions and beliefs of the student teacher. His conferences include an "analysis of relationships between intentions and the theoretical commitments which are embedded in classroom actions." (Zeichner p.23) For Zeichner, reflection in the conference goes beyond discussing whether the teaching/learning action met the student teacher's objectives to discussing hidden outcomes, such as the educational consequences and possible moral-ethical ramifications of certain teaching actions. Student teachers are encouraged to reflect on their own beliefs and how their beliefs influence their instruction. The intent is to develop teachers capable of making thoughtful decisions rather than being constrained by previous experiences, external institutional constraints and circumstantial events. The School-Based Teacher Education Program program at Washington University modified the field placement supervisory conference to include continued methods instruction by the supervisor (Cohn, 1981). The purpose of this instruction is to aid the student teacher in conceptualizing the relationship between methods courses and practical applications in the field placement. For example, during the conference the supervisor teaches the student teacher how to appropriately teach sight words or context clues to the children if the student teacher is unsure of how to proceed with that type of skill lesson.

All three of these supervision perspectives focus on the interaction between the student teacher and supervisor. However, they appear to have three different purposes. The first example is focused on the supervisor's agenda.

The second on reflective decision making and the third on teaching methods. The examples of supervisory conferences provide three perspectives for analyzing the substance of conferences.

The purpose of this paper is to suggest a fourth alternative means to analyze the interactions taking place during a supervisory conference. First, we will describe our theoretical perspective and then use actual transcripts of supervisory conferences from the Michigan State University Multiple Perspectives Teacher Education program to describe our understandings of an application of the theoretical framework. We have chosen as our perspective Vygotsky's social interactional view of thought and language and the role of the interactions which occur during successful supervisory conferences. The two major aspects of Vygotsky's theory of thought and language that will be discussed are that 1) language used in a social context develops higher mental processes and 2) it is the language itself that is the tool for internal conceptual change. The aspects will be described and illustrated using the following hypothetical supervisory conference interaction.

Supervisor (S): What were you thinking about during your lesson today?

Student Teacher (S.T.): I kept wondering how to get all the children involved in the language experience story we were trying to write together. I thought they would be really excited about the story 'cause it was about dogs. All the kids in my reading group have dogs, so I thought they could make up a group story but it didn't work out right. I wanted it to be a story with a beginning, middle and end like we have been learning about in reading methods but it didn't work. It's just a bunch of sentences. Linda wouldn't even give a sentence about a dog. Her sentence was "I put clothes on my cat," because Javier had just said, "I put my puppy in my big truck." I just think these kids are too little to do experience stories.

S: What decisions did you make when you realized the children weren't writing the type of story you wanted?

S.T.: Not to write down the sentence about the cat... I told Linda that we were writing a story about dogs. Linda said she didn't know any "stories" about dogs.

S.: Yes.

S.T.: So she never put a sentence in our story. I feel bad but I gave her a chance.

S.: What have you taught the children about the parts of a story?

S.T.: Well, I read lots of books to them. Where the Wild Things are, Goggles!, and Frog & Toad Are Friends.

S.: Good books.

S.T.: They really like books. We always talk about books after I read. I ask questions like: What happened in the books? What did so-and-so do? What happened at the end? Lots of questions. They're really good at talking about books and answering my questions, especially about funny ones.

S.: Have you ever talked about the structure of stories by telling the students explicitly the parts and modeling the way you use the parts of the story to write a story? You learned about the explicit strategy in reading methods.

S.T.: No, I thought they'd just understand it by doing it over and over.

S. It is hard to know if they do or do not demonstrate an implicit understanding of the parts of the story when reading and discussing stories. Most of the time it isn't crucial that they know explicitly, but today they needed to know so they could apply their skills while writing their own stories.

S.T.: Yeah! I guess I was expecting too much from them without really teaching the strategy to do it.

S.: Yes, did you do anything in your lesson to link their experiences with hearing stories with beginning, middle and end and writing one?

S.T.: No, I just thought they knew. You mean I need to show them and then have them show me how stories like Googles! have a beginning, middle and end. Then I can use that as an example of what we are going to do in the story about dogs.

S.: Yes, then you can help them make the links to what they have used in one place, when listening to someone else's story, to when they're dictating the story about dogs.

S.T.: I guess, I thought they could do it. But now I realize I need to go back and teach them how to recognize and create stories with a beginning, middle and end.

In the first supervisory conference above, the student teacher is not pleased with the reading group's language experience story lesson. The student teacher has successfully completed reading, language arts and children's literature course work, but has not made an appropriate application in this setting. She/he does not comprehend the need to make explicit deliberate links for the children by relating their past experiences with children's literature selections like Where the Wild Things Are, that have definite beginnings, middles and ends, with the present situation of writing a group story with a beginning, middle and end.

In a second supervisory conference several days later the following interactions occur:

S.: What were you thinking about when planning today's lesson?

S.T.: I wanted to try another experience story. I was remembering our talk and how I needed to be more explicit about the link between the structure of stories, beginning, middle, end, we have listened to and the one we were going to write. Because all the children had been to the zoo on a fieldtrip I decided to use that as our theme.

S.: How did you help them make links?

S.T.: In our lesson yesterday I read Where the Wild Things Are and showed the children explicitly about the beginning of the story where Max gets in trouble, then the middle where he goes to the land of the Wild Things and then the end of the story when Max comes home and his supper is still hot. Then I used a second book, Ira Sleeps Over, and asked the children to tell me the parts after we read. I told them that soon we would be writing a story and that our story needed a beginning, middle and end, too. So today before we began to write the experience story we reviewed the parts of a story we had found in the stories Where the Wild Things Are and Ira Sleeps Over and we talked about how we would use parts in our own story. They got pretty excited about writing the story.

S.: Why do you think they were excited?

S.T. Because they had a better understanding of what we were going to do and how to do it. And they did like going to the zoo.

S.: So not only do you have a better idea of where you are leading them in the process of learning to write stories, but they also know and feel more in control?

S.T.: Yes, it just worked better.

S: Were they more successful in writing a story?

S.T. Yes! It is a great story about our trip to the zoo. It starts with us leaving the school on the bus, it tells about some of the things we saw, and it ends with our safe return to school. And every child contributed even Linda. Her sentence was one of the best. It was about how Mr. Marks, the other first grade teacher, almost lost his hat out the window when the zoo train went around a sharp curve.

S.: How has your thinking changed since your first lesson using the dog experience story.

S.T.: Before I made assumptions about what the children knew about stories and how they could use that knowledge that were not correct. Now I understand and can use explicit instruction and have successful group stories, like the one about the visit to the zoo. I didn't transfer what I learned in reading methods about explicit instruction to story writing. I now see that explicit instruction is a concept which I need to attend to in all areas.

The first aspect of Vygotsky's theory to be described and illustrated, using the preceeding example of the conferences, is the social origin and nature of the development of higher mental processes. For Vygotsy, (1978 p.57), "all the higher functions (voluntary attention,logical memory and the formation of concepts) originate as actual relations between human individuals." Higher functions like concept formation need communication between individuals to develop. The concept of explicit instruction, telling the students a particular skill, fact, concept, or principle and modeling the cognitive process for applying it, requires opportunities to discuss how to apply explicit instruction in new situations. In the example, the supervisory conference provides the social context for the student teacher's formation of a more complex concept of explicit instruction. The supervisor helps clarify the misconception that the story structure--beginning, middle and end--could

implicitly be understood and applied in the writing of experience story without explicit instruction about story structure. The student teacher's independent level of development at the time of the first conference does not include an understanding of the need to aid the children explicitly to make the links between the structure of stories they have heard and ones that they can write. If the student teacher was not challenged by the supervisor as illustrated in the conference transcript by "have you ever talked explicitly about the structure of stories," the student teacher would continue to think "these kids are too little to do experience stories." Vygotsky calls the social process of developing higher mental processes, zones of proximal development, and defined them as "the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers. (p.86)." In other words the conceptually more mature individual, in this case the supervisor, encourages the less mature individual, the student teacher, to go beyond present independent capabilities. The encouragement is achieved by challenging and by providing links for the student teacher during the conference interaction. The student teacher is challenged to internalize and apply concepts which are more complex than those used independently by making links to course work, past experiences or demonstrations observed. The supervisory conference becomes a social setting within which the higher mental processes of the student teacher can develop.

The internalization of new concepts leads to a second aspect of Vygotsky's framework, the use of language not just as communication, but as an actual tool or sign to reshape the thinking of the learner. The thought and language used at the interpersonal level, the verbal interaction between a less mature individual and the more mature individual, becomes an intrapersonal one (inside

the less mature individual's thinking) as the learner becomes in control of the newest level of learning. The less mature individual has restructured his/her thinking in response to the conceptual challenge offered by the more conceptually mature individual. There is a difference in thinking at the intrapersonal level. The intrapersonal development provides for a process of self-regulation or metacognition (Wertsch, 1978). In the preceeding example of the supervisory conference, following the observation of the teaching/learning process, the supervisor's task is to challange the student teacher's view of how the children can learn to write stories that include a beginning, middle and end. However, the bigger conceptual issue behind the conference interactions is the appropriate use of explicit or implicit instruction. The student teacher has been using, implicit methods such as reading aloud to the children and asking them questions about the beginning, middle, and end of stories. She/he states "They were really good about talking about books and answering my questions." However, the student teacher does not see the importance of directly teaching the children about the parts of a story and how to transfer the listening skill about story parts before writing the "dog story." The supervisor provides leadership at the interpersonal level for linking the classroom occurrence back to reading/language arts methods course and to the principles of implicit and explicit instruction when she/he asks, "Have you ever talked about the structure of stories by telling the students explicitly the parts and modeling the way you use the parts of the story to write a story? You learned about the explicit strategy in reading methods." The supervisor's leadership challenges the student teacher to take the information to the intrapersonal level and in the future to use explicitness as another aspect in deciding how to plan and teach lessons.

The student teacher's ability to internalize, at the intrapersonal level, the importance of explicit instruction and to apply explicit instruction can be seen in the second partial supervisory conference. Intrapersonal development can be observed as the student states, "I was remembering our talk and how I needed to be more explicit about the link between the structure of stories, beginning, middle and end, we have listened to and the one we are going to write." Not only is the student teacher able to repeat the information on explicitness discussed interpersonally in the previous conference, but she/he is using the information intrapersonally to make decisions about the subsequent instruction. When asked in the second conference how the links between reading children's literature with a definite story structure and getting ready to write a story the intrapersonal control of the concept of explicitness is evident. The student teacher has internalized explicitness in both the planning and successful implementation of the lesson. The student teacher is able to describe a complex lesson strategy that includes reading a story and modeling how she/he uses story structure with the book Where the Wild Things Are, and letting the children apply their knowledge with a second selection, Ira Sleeps Over. The student teacher's final demonstration of a more complex intrapersonal structure of thinking about explicit instruction is observed in the links made during the lesson with the children's books and the consecutive lesson as the children began writing the zoo story together. The student teacher states, "I told them that soon we would be writing a story and that our story needed a beginning, middle and end, too...and we talked about how we would use parts in our own story." The interaction using language in the supervisory conference is not merely communication, but is a tool that challenges and reshapes the student teacher's thinking.

The choice of language that is used as a tool to challenge the learner to reshape thinking is of great importance. The more mature individual listens carefully to the learner before engaging in conceptual problem solving beyond the learner's independent zone of problem solving . Rogoff and Gardner (1984) describe "a region of senstivity to instruction." It is a region that is the most appropriate difference between the independent level of the student teacher and a new more complex level of understanding. The supervisor assesses and uses information that is new but not too difficult because it is linked to coursework and prior lessons. In the examples, the supervisor uses the dialogue to asses the student teacher's conceptual understanding of the importance of explicit instruction. In the first conference example, the supervisor asks a general question about the thinking (metacognition) during the lesson and the student responds with the independent level.

S.: What were you thinking about during your lesson today?

S.T.: ...but it didn't work right. I wanted it to be a story with a beginning, middle, and end...

The supervisor asseses that the student has not internalized the concept of explicit instruction in this application and asks another general question.

S.: What have you taught the children about the parts of a story?

The student teacher is not able to make the linkage and respond.

S.T. Well, I read lots of books to them...

The supervisor assesses the "region of sensitivity" in the interaction to be quite small and asks a more specific question.

S.: Have you ever talked about the structure of stories by telling the students explicitly the parts and modeling the way you use the parts of the story to write a story? You learned about the explicit strategy in Reading Methods.

After the student begins to talk with comprehension about the need to use explicit instruction the supervisor accepts the more complex understanding that has been verbalized. In future lessons the supervisor plans to observe if there is an application of explicit instruction. In the example of the second supervisory conference, the supervisor does observe a move to a higher level of mental processing when the student teacher summarizes his/her understanding by saying "Now I understand and can use explicit instruction and have successful group stories, like the one about the visit to the zoo." In this example and in conferences in general the role of the supervisor is to "proceed opportunistically in the transfer of information and skills in a purposeful, flexible way, making use of pragmatic aspects of the context to develop the means of instruction" (Rogoff and Gardner, 1984, p. 103). The supervisor seizes the opportunity in the conference interaction to expand the student teacher's concept of an area of planning or implementation of instruction on the assessment of the student teacher's independent level and the zone of proximal development.

In summary, Vygotsky's view of thought and language provides a framework to analyze the interactions between the supervisor and the student teacher in the supervisory conference. Vygotsky's theory provides a model for describing the interactions in the supervisory conferences by demonstrating that the appropriateness of the linkages made between the student teacher and the supervisor challenge the student teacher to levels of higher mental processing within a zone of proximal development. The supervisor assesses the interactions in the dialogue and provides an appropriate zone of proximal development. As the challenge is internalized it reshapes the thinking of the student teacher to more complex levels. The new level of thinking becomes the new independent level. In subsequent conference the new level is challenged and the process of development continues. In supervision, there is a place for

interaction which allows the student teacher to be challenged, but not frustrated with new concepts. Vygotsky's ideas have implications of the nature of interactions in supervisor/student teacher conferences.

An analysis of transcripts of supervisor and student teacher conferences lead the authors to believe that one important element of the interactions are the links made between the teacher candidate's perceptions and ideas and those of the supervisor. It appears that when certain types of links are made that the student teacher becomes more aware of their own ability to teach and their ability to reflect on and evaluate their teaching. One could infer that a student teacher who works with a supervisor who is able to communicate through a dialogue that allows for the student teacher to make multiple conceptual connections would have the opportunity to expand their understanding of 1) teaching/learning processes, 2) skills needed to develop or refine teaching, 3) specific knowledge and skills they need to acquire, and 4) processes for acquiring the knowledge and skills they need to expand their abilities.

Four types of links seem to be critical to the student teacher's understanding. The first type of link is the one made between what the student teacher studies in his/her course work at the university and his/her applications in the classroom. This is what traditionally we think about as the relationship between theory and practice. The second type of link is the one made between what a student teacher observes during demonstrations of methodical procedures and its original framework and the student teacher's own use of the method. This type of linking helps the student teacher to see that classroom adaptations vary from that which is learned abstractly about instructional methods in university courses. The third link is the one made between different ideas generated during the conference. Here it is important for the student teacher and the supervisor to each be aware of the similarities

and differences between and among the student teacher's perceptions of an event and the supervisor's perceptions of the same event. The fourth link is between/among past, current and/or future lessons taught by the student teacher. Here the content of the discussion varies and may be focused on the cohesion of 1) curricular decisions, 2) performance of the student teacher, or 3) skill development of the pupils being taught. The intent of the conference is thus to look at any one of these factors over a period of time.

Depending on the content, philosophy and conception of teaching embedded in the student teacher's education program the specific content of the links will vary. However, in order to make these links the supervisor must be knowledgeable in the content, philosophy and conception of teaching in which his/her student teacher has been educated. Without that knowledge the ability to link with the student teacher's thinking becomes very difficult. The shared experience (knowledge of the same content) contributes to the ability of the student teacher and the supervisor to carry on a dialogue.

While four critical linkages were identified analysis of the transcripts of student teacher and supervisor conferences leads us to believe that frequently these linkages are not made. Instead, there are a number of other things that go on in the conference. For example, we found that frequently the focus of the conference was on the agenda of the supervisor without consideration of the perceptions or concerns of the student teacher. It appeared that the supervisor's observation sometimes sparked a memory of something she/he did when she/he was teaching. The supervisor's past experience then became the theme of the conference. In these cases, student teachers listened patiently but were not able to use the examples to improve their own teaching. Another type of interaction included supervisors telling the student teacher what was observed and what should have been done instead without rationale or

explanation of the observations. In these cases, the student teacher appeared to be left without an understanding of the purpose of the feedback and did not have a way to make decisions about what to do next. In the case of the second example, telling without rationale, the student teacher was left without knowing if they were to follow up by mimicing what the supervisor told him/her or if the supervisor thought that the comments related to what the student teacher would do in the future.

Another type of interaction which appears to interfer with communication for conceptual development is the supervisor's denial of the student teacher's feelings. These denials appeared in a number of ways. They included telling the student teacher "not to feel that way", saying "no, you don't feel like that", ignoring the feeling statements, or contradicting the data the student gave as to why she/he was feeling as she/he did.

A final set of interactions which all seemed to interfer with the dialogue between the supervisor and the student teacher involve common communication skills. We found that many conferences had no examples of either the student teacher or the supervisor verifying that they or the other person understood what was being said. Similiarly, we found that the student teacher and the supervisor did not listen to each other. The nature of these conference was two monologues overlaying each other. A third characteristic we found was the supervisor and/or the student teacher interrupting each other with neither giving way to clarify what either's messages or concerns were.

Conclusion

After analyzing the transcripts of student teacher and supervisor conferences we hypothesize that the quality of the conferences is embedded in the ability of the supervisor to orchestrate the linkages during the conferences. This means that the supervisor must be able to interactively develop with the student teacher a dialogue in which the complexity of ideas and linkages increases over time and even over a given conference. This requires two specific types of ability. The first is the ability to make links between practice and the professional knowledge taught in a given program. The second is the ability to determine with the student teacher the appropriate amount of data to be discussed. Our Goldilocks theory suggests that too little information will leave the student teacher unchallenged and at his/her current place of practice. On the other hand too much may leave the candidate overloaded and confused about what to do next. That leaves the supervisor and the student teacher with the task of determining the "just right" place such that the student teacher can advance between conferences.

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